

D

## The Face of China As Seen by Photographers

and Travelers from 1860 through 1912 is probably the largest and the most significant and comprehensive collection of early photographs of China ever assembled.

The exhibit brings together for the first time, photographic views of China, its land, its people, and its culture, all photographed from the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth century.

Photographs in the exhibit were found buried in museum archives, in gallery and museum collections across the country and around the world, and in boxes in the homes of private collectors in the United States and abroad.

Michael Hoffman, Advisor for the Alfred Stieglitz Center of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, organized the exhibit in Philadelphia. Mr. Hoffman visited some 50 different locations and reviewed over 10,000 photographs to select the more than 200 pictures on display.

Mr. Hoffman has indicated that the show is primarily focused upon displaying the best photographs made in China during the 52-year period between 1860 and 1912. Selection of the photographs in the exhibit was made on the basis of the quality of the images and the spirit of China evoked by those images rather than upon any effort to photographically document the period.

Subjects included in the exhibit range from landscapes and views of cities to temples and interiors of Chinese homes. There are views of pagodas, palaces and monasteries, a Western-style restaurant, and rice paddies. Pictures of people range from Chinese nobility and government officials to Manchu brides and wedding couples. Views of courtesans, families, women with bound feet, as well as scenes of itinerant tradesmen and criminals awaiting execution all came under the cameras' lenses during this period. Margaret Loke, in the New York Times Magazine, reported that the photographs in the exhibit range "from the breathtaking to the gruesome."

Very little is known about the hundreds of  
photographers who were taking pictures in China during  
the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.  
  
Western photographers who traveled to China during this  
period tended to follow merchants, missionaries,  
adventurers, and assorted government and military  
personnel. A very strong sense of adventure accompani-  
ed Western voyagers who were setting out for China  
since so little was known at the time about the land  
and people of China. Travelers had little idea of  
the quality, the reality, or the origination of the  
civilization they were about to visit.  
  
Much more, however, is known about photo-  
graphic process and technique during this period  
and it is amazing that the attempt was ever made to  
produce photographs at all except under the most ideal  
conditions.

The cameras of the period had to be very large  
*the 10 x 12 inch larger*  
to accomodate glass plates 10 x 12 inches or 12 x 16 .  
which were used as negatives.  
inches or more in size. The weight of these glass  
plates, which were transported securely packed in  
wooden crates, was a formidable obstacle. Several  
heavy interchangeable lenses used with the cameras and  
the cumbersome tripod that was needed to hold the  
camera added even more problems for the traveling photo-  
grapher.

A portable dark room also had to accompany  
these early photographers and included a lightproof tent  
plus all the chemicals needed for developing and fixing  
the photographs and for preparing the glass plates  
which served as negatives. In addition, large airtight  
glass jars had to be carried for processing the glass  
plates and the prints.

Upon occasion the early photographer found it  
necessary to hire a large number of local porters to  
transport all of this clumsy equipment which was requir-  
ed to set up laboratories in the field.

It is clear that nineteenth century photographers had to be persons of considerable stamina, as well as persons well trained in chemistry and its practical applications. Photographers produced their own photographic emulsions and developed and printed their own photographs with relatively primitive materials. Each successful picture was the result of a strenuous endurance test for the photographer.

Virtually all the photographs in the exhibit were taken by Western photographers and many reflect a Western point of view in the scenes and people that they depict. It is perhaps interesting to consider what the results might have been had the Chinese turned the cameras on themselves.

6

The first known Western photographer in China was a man named Felice A. Beato, who traveled with the Anglo-French armies to depict the conquest of Tientsin (天津) and the sacking of the Imperial Summer Palace outside the ~~capital~~, Peking. Beato's works are included in the exhibit, as well as the photographic works of John Thompson, who focused on the imperial family and its subjects. Also on view are photographs of Donald Mennie and the White brothers who aimed their cameras at the landscapes that were so often the theme of Chinese landscape artists. Pictures taken by E.H. Wilson, Thomas Childe and others are included in the exhibit as well as works by photographers whose identities are unknown.

Photographs in the exhibit were brought together from private and public collections including photographs from the archives of Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University; Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris; British Museum, London; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts; Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; George Eastman House, Rochester, N.Y.; Library of Congress; Museum of New Mexico; National Archives; National Army Museum; Naval Historical Center; New York Public Library; Peabody Museum of Salem; Smithsonian Institute; Victoria and Albert Museum; and the collections of Chaoying Fang; Arnold H. Crane; Edmonton Gallery; Elaine Ellman; Graphics International; Hillelson/Kahn; Howard Ricketts; Daniel Wolf; and a number of others.

*[Handwritten signature]*

An illustrated catalog for the exhibition  
has been published by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in  
association with Aperture, Inc. and will be available  
at the Museum Sales Desk.